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SUBJECT: UGANDA/DRC/SUDAN: OPERATION LIGHTENING THUNDER
ROLLING ALONG

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[G](#). KAMPALA 116

Classified By: Ambassador Steven A. Browning for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d
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[1](#)1. (S NF) Summary: Joint military operations against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), codenamed Operation Lightening Thunder (OLT), now entering their fourth month, have gained significant momentum after initially stumbling out of the gate. The Ugandan Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF) and Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) now have 7,500 troops in the area of operation and plan to saturate the area even further. Since mid-January, allied forces have successfully engaged LRA elements, capturing or killing LRA combatants, seizing equipment, supplies, and weapons, and rescuing abductees. Escapees and defectors report that if military pressure is lifted off the LRA, Joseph Kony will retaliate against civilian populations. There is broad support for the operation to achieve its objective of killing or capturing the LRA leadership, including from UN Special Envoy for LRA-Affected Areas Joachim Chissano, but Congolese President Kabila's domestic political problems threaten the continuation of the operation. End Summary.

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BACKGROUND
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[1](#)2. (SBU) OLT is the result of over two years of failed peace negotiations. The LRA used the peace process as a way to buy time to rebuild its forces, all the while continuing to terrorize civilians in the area around its redoubt in the Congo's Garamba National Park (Ref A). Regional discussions about military operations against the LRA began two years ago, but intensified in May 2008 as it became clear that Kony would not sign a peace agreement. The discussions took on many forms and were conducted at many levels: quarterly military exchanges between the UPDF, FARDC, Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), and the UN Mission in Congo (MONUC); quarterly Tripartite Plus meetings and quarterly Chief of Defense Forces (CHOD) meetings, and at the head of state summits. Key players continue to credit the U.S.-facilitated Tripartite Plus process for helping to build confidence between the Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

¶3. (S NF) One key turning point in the decision-making process was the summit meeting between Museveni and Kabila in Arusha, Tanzania in May 2008 (Ref B). For the first time, Kabila did not express opposition to operations against the LRA, primarily because of Kony's failure to sign the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) and reports of LRA abductions in DRC between February and April 2008, according to Andre Kapanga, Kabila's advisor on the LRA. Kapanga said that Kabila was never happy with the LRA presence in Garamba National Park and had only agreed to allow Kony to stay, unmolested, as long as the LRA did not abduct or loot local residents and remained at the negotiating table.

¶4. (SBU) The LRA, however, did not respect this agreement and went on several killing and kidnapping sprees from February to April, abducting 157 in Central African Republic.

At least 200 individuals were abducted in DRC, which recorded a significant increase in LRA activity in the Dungu area during this period (Ref C). Defectors reported that Kony was reconstituting his force with non-Acholis, his northern Ugandan tribesmen whom he felt had betrayed him. In the first half of 2008 as the peace agreement was being concluded, the LRA abducted 95 Sudanese, killed 31 SPLA during an inexplicable attack on the assembly area at Nabanga, and killed 26 civilians. From September to November 2008, the LRA rampaged through the area of Dungu, killing 167, abducting 316 children, and displacing some 35,000. The LRA's brutal abductions from Congolese schools caught international attention. Human Rights Watch reports that these attacks were aimed at punishing the civilian population for assisting LRA defectors and escapees (Ref D).

¶5. (S NF) At Arusha, Kabila informed Museveni about his plan for FARDC, backed by MONUC, known as Operation Rudia, to

counter the LRA. Kabila's plan focused on pushing the LRA out of Garamba, while Museveni's plan was to eliminate the LRA altogether. Kabila asked Museveni for details of Uganda's plan. Some Ugandan officers interpreted Kabila's response as a delaying tactic, but Kapanga insisted that for Kabila to agree to Ugandan troops on Congolese soil, he had to know every detail to justify it. A skeptical, but willing Ugandan Chief of Defense Forces, General Aronda Nyakairima, shuttled between Kabila and Museveni with the operational details. By early November, in the wake of the LRA's brutal abduction and killing spree in Dungu and internal and international pressure to do something to protect Congolese citizens, Kabila agreed to President Museveni's request to conduct joint military operations against the LRA. With Kabila's permission, the preparations for OLT kicked into high gear.

¶6. (U) Meanwhile, Kony's failure to show up six times for meetings arranged for him to meet his own negotiating team and sign the peace deal sealed the fate of the 2.5 year Juba Peace Process (Ref E). The talks were undermined by LRA complaints over allowances and deliveries of donor-provided food. Kony did not send military leaders to the table to negotiate and was represented by self-serving members of the diaspora. Kony finally did meet with his delegation and Acholi religious leaders from November 29-30, but only after forcing the mediator to deliver food to his combatants first.

Kony badly mistreated the delegation, refused to sign the FPA, and did not call the mediator, Riek Machar, or UN Special Envoy for LRA-Affected Areas Joachim Chissano, who were waiting in the assembly area for him. On December 1, the peace process was formally declared over. During his March 12, 2009 visit to Uganda, Government of Southern Sudan President Salva Kiir stated that "When Kony decided not to sign the agreed document on November 29, 2008, he opted for the military option."

¶7. (C) Museveni decided to launch OLT two weeks after Kony failed to sign the FPA and the peace process formally ended. Museveni reiterated that Kony could call him personally, but the call never came. Chissano met with President Museveni on December 3 and told him that only military pressure could change the negative dynamic that had emerged and force Kony

to sign the FPA (Ref F). Museveni told Chissano of his intentions, which Chissano supported. He told the UN Security Council on December 17 that military operations needed to be "decisive" or they could have devastating effects on the region.

¶8. (S NF) Once Kabila agreed to the military action, Washington-based discussions focused on the level of support the USG would or would not provide to the operation. It was decided early on in the process that there would be no/no U.S. boots on-the-ground nor a U.S. air strike against Kony, who had been designated by Executive Order as an individual on the Foreign Terrorist Organization list on August 22, ¶2008. Through the interagency process, it was decided that the USG would provide intelligence, cover fuel costs, and send a military planning team to review the Ugandan plans. U.S. military planners worked with the UPDF and pointed out weaknesses in its plan and suggested ways in which to strengthen it.

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OFF TO A STUMBLING START
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¶9. (S NF) OLT's objectives were to destroy and occupy LRA camps, search for and destroy LRA forces, rescue persons abducted by the LRA, and to capture or kill LRA leaders. Museveni wanted OLT to begin on December 13. However, bad weather, Kabila's last minute hesitation, and the refusal of the contract pilots to fly to Dungu combined to delay the attack by one day. This prevented the forward location of air assets and insertion of ground troops prior to the air attacks on the LRA's main camps. Meanwhile, on December 13, the Ugandans received information that Kony was preparing to depart Camp Kiswahili, possibly for good, the following day. Given this information, the Ugandan Government decided to go ahead with the aerial bombardment using attack helicopters rather than their MiG fighters, which could not be inserted due to bad weather. This meant that the helicopters they had planned to use to ferry in troops were needed to bring in ammunition, rockets, and fuel to support the helicopters rather than to put troops in to surround the main camps.

¶10. (C) Another complicating factor for the insertion of ground troops was the need to maintain secrecy in order to surprise the LRA leaders. This required that only a few individuals in each government knew about the operations, preventing them from deploying blocking troops. Kabila also insisted that MONUC could not be informed and that once the operation kicked off, the UPDF had to go through FARDC to talk to MONUC. These factors hampered the operation in its first two months.

¶11. (S NF) The initial attack on December 14 appeared to go well, surprising a group of LRA commanders who were in the middle of a meeting out in the open. Women and children had gone out to work the fields earlier. There is conflicting information on Kony's whereabouts at the time of the attack on Camp Kiswahili. Kony had left the camp 15 minutes before the attack to go hunting, according to LRA defectors who fled during the assault. President Museveni claims that Kony had been tipped off. He stated that Kony had been given equipment to detect the chatter of the pilots of the incoming helicopters. Other information suggests that despite extremely tight intelligence systems, Kony received a call warning him of the attack. The initial attacks scattered the LRA leadership, which disrupted command and control and resulted in the loss of food and ammunition supplies. Because of the aforementioned confluence of bad luck with the weather and logistics, there were no troops around the main camp to prevent the LRA from escaping. The UPDF later airlifted in about 200 commandos, who occupied the abandoned LRA camps to destroy food and supplies.

¶12. (S NF) After the attack, the slow build-up of Ugandan troops in the area began, with some 2,000 UPDF soldiers on the ground in late December. Their objective was to establish

a cordon around the main LRA groups which had scattered after the attack. At the time of the LRA massacres at Doruma, Duru, and Faradje, there were no UPDF or FARDC troops in those areas. The LRA, according to eyewitness accounts from HRW, pretended to be defectors or escapees when they entered the three towns. They checked to see if there was any visible security presence before calling in other LRA members. The LRA then bludgeoned to death all the men, women, and children. The exception was Faradje, where 160 children were abducted to porter away supplies.

¶13. (S NF) HRW reported that the LRA attacks were intended to scare local communities from helping any escapees. The UPDF said the attacks were also meant to divert the UPDF's attention and resources away from Kony and other senior leaders. The UPDF did not take its troops off its key target, the LRA leadership, and relied on FARDC to protect Congolese civilian populations. Senior Uganda security officials told us that the military would not repeat the mistakes it made in Operation Iron Fist, waged in northern Uganda and southern Sudan from 2002-2004, including being tricked to respond to LRA diversionary attacks on civilians in order to facilitate Kony's escape to Sudan.

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CURRENT STATE OF PLAY
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¶14. (S NF) Since mid-January, the UPDF has rapidly stepped up its offensive operations against LRA elements. The UPDF, FARDC, and SPLA are regularly engaging LRA patrols and groups trying to escape north into Sudan or west into CAR. These engagements are causing LRA losses of equipment, personnel, and degradation of communications capacity. The LRA appears to be split into two groups. We estimate that there are approximately 350-400 LRA left, with the bulk of those remaining with Kony and senior LRA officers. This group is hiding while it waits for the UPDF operation to end, according to defectors and escapees. (Note: The LRA learned during Operation Iron Fist that the UPDF modus operandi was to attack, linger a bit, then rush off to respond, after the fact, to another LRA diversionary attack. End Note.) The members of the other, more active group tend to be less senior, newly-promoted officers. The relationship between these two groups is uncoordinated. There does not seem to be any guidance from the senior group to the junior group. Instead, there is bickering between the junior group commanders and games of one-upmanship between them. The LRA appears to have no clear direction, battle plan, or strategy to achieve an objective such as relocating out of DRC or

setting up new bases.

¶15. (C) A positive trend in OLT is the absence thus far of verified reports of human rights abuses by the UPDF or FARDC and their cooperation with village and local leaders, who voice their support for the operation. The UPDF has undergone a significant professionalization program over the past five years. UNICEF Uganda reports that Dungen-based non-governmental organizations expressed shock at how open and helpful the UPDF commanders were when addressing humanitarian and human rights issues. These organizations asked for the protocols Ugandan-based organizations have with the UPDF, particularly in the treatment of women and children, to replicate them. President Museveni reportedly made good behavior and proper treatment of civilians a top priority as part of the confidence building with Kabila. Museveni also is fixated on ensuring that his enemies in the diaspora do not try to have him charged with war crimes by the International Criminal Court, according to Hussein Kashilingi, a Museveni family member and the President's former legal advisor.

¶16. (U) In January, HRW praised the performance of the two FARDC Republican Guard units at Doruma, particularly their professionalism, competence, and positive interactions with local leaders. This unit twice repelled LRA deputy leader Okot Odhiambo. MONUC quickly credits its logistics support

and sustenance for the lack of looting and civilian abuses by FARDC. The FARDC and UPDF have forged good cooperation with local leaders, who provide information on LRA sightings. The civilian leaders in Haut Uele have pressed the government to stay the course and finish off the LRA.

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OLT IN NUMBERS
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¶17. (U) Our most current numbers of casualties, abductions, and displaced persons during OLT as of March 9 are:

-- Killed or Captured. The UPDF reports 86 LRA fighters killed and 16 captured. Seven UPDF soldiers have been killed in engagements with the LRA.

-- Rescued. The UPDF reports that it has documented the rescue of 365 adults and children. UNICEF reports that of that number, 127 Congolese, Ugandan, and Sudanese children have been rescued. UNICEF's protection officer, Cornelius Williams, tells us that many Congolese children who escape are returning directly to their villages and are not counted.

-- Killed By LRA. UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and HRW put the numbers killed by the LRA at 620 between December 24, 2008 and January 13, ¶2009. The LRA attack on Tora on January 16 killed 100 civilians. Both HRW and UNOCHA agree that the LRA killed and abducted hundreds of people throughout 2008. UNOCHA reports that between December 2007 and January 2009, 900 civilians were killed and 711 were abducted in DRC and Central African Republic. This includes those killed and abducted between LRA killing and kidnapping sprees in February-March 2008, from September to November 2008, and December 2008. In southern Sudan, UNOCHA reports 127 LRA-related deaths and 66 abductions throughout 2008 and 2009.

-- Displaced. Some 160,000 Congolese are displaced, including 30,000 that were displaced during the September-November 2008 LRA attacks on Dungu residents. Humanitarian organizations report that it is difficult to get accurate figures because many Congolese are moving into larger towns with relatives for added protection. As a result, these individuals are not working the fields and their presence is expected to strain family resources.

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HUMANITARIAN ISSUES
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¶18. (S NF) There have been no large-scale massacres by the LRA of civilians since January 16 at Tora, where 100 civilians were killed. Humanitarian organizations and MONUC are reporting that LRA attacks against civilians have dropped off dramatically since early January. Those that do occur are sporadic and involve one to two individuals only. The large influx of Ugandan and Congolese troops into the area of

operation, a change in LRA tactics, and increased cooperation between the allied forces and local defense units have contributed to decreased civilian casualties. MONUC and humanitarian organizations report only sporadic LRA attacks by elements searching for food. Currently, there are 4,000 Ugandan troops, including 200 commandos, and 3,500 Congolese troops in the area of operation. One thousand SPLA and 150 Armed Forces of Central African Republic (FACA) troops are deployed along the Sudanese and Central African borders as blocking forces. Both SPLA and FACA have successfully engaged the LRA, preventing them from crossing the borders. Museveni and Kabila have agreed to send more troops to "saturate" the area. We have heard that 5,000 additional UPDF troops will enter through southern Sudan and that Kabila has committed three additional brigades (5,000). Congo has given southern Sudan permission for hot pursuit of LRA up to 15 kilometers inside DRC.

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119. (C) OLT remains an African operation and the presidents appear committed to seeing the operation through until it achieves its objective: the capture or death of the LRA leadership. Congolese President Kabila remains the wild card. He reportedly agreed for OLT to continue despite public pronouncements to the contrary) presumably made for domestic purposes. Museveni understands Kabila's domestic political situation and agreed that Kabila could make any public statements about the operation's end date he needed to for domestic consumption. Ugandan officials tell us that Kabila does not share information with his advisors, which makes it difficult to coordinate OLT's public face and causes confusion, particularly when his military hierarchy take actions that do not coincide with what he has told the Ugandan Government. The Ugandans are keeping Kabila informed.

120. (S NF) On March 12, Kabila began meeting with Ugandan CHOD Aronda in Goma to plan a withdrawal of UPDF headquarters elements. A hand-over ceremony was held on March 15, which UPDF spokesman Felix Kulayigye told us was purely symbolic and designed to lower the Ugandan footprint to help Kabila in his struggle against his opponents. Kulayigye said UPDF operational elements would remain and that Uganda would use southern Sudan to move troops in and out. We do not have details yet on how many UPDF will remain and where. However, there appears to be some confusion within the UPDF. At least two operational elements pulled back from a planned attack of a meeting of top LRA leaders on March 15.

121. (S NF) GOSS Defense Attache Lt. Col. Majier Abudulla in Kampala reports that GOSS President Salva Kiir is satisfied that the alliance is working well. The operation has strong support in Western Equatoria, which bore the brunt of LRA attacks over the past year. He cautioned that only a few military officers are "in-the-know" because of potential leaks to Khartoum, which he believes still wants to rescue Joseph Kony. Sudan's ambassador to Uganda was removed in February for failing to inform Khartoum of OLT, according to Majier. He also told us that OLT has left GOSS Vice President Riek Machar, who facilitated the peace talks, "out in the cold." Southern Sudanese local residents are assisting the SPLA and have wreaked vigilante justice on LRA elements foraging for supplies. GOSS President Salva Kiir, during a visit to Museveni on March 12, expressed his continued support for OLT, according to Majier.

122. (C) CAR is a latecomer to OLT, but appears ready to stay the course until the operation is finished.

MONUC: SPLIT PERSONALITY

123. (C) MONUC personnel in Kampala report that there is a division between MONUC's Force Commander, who believes MONUC can do more to assist the operation against the LRA, and the UN's politicians in New York and Kinshasa, who fear being too closely associated with it in the event there are more civilian casualties. MONUC appears to have been rattled by MSF-Switzerland's press conference in early February that placed the blame on MONUC for the lack of protection of civilian populations. UN Special Representative for Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) John Holmes said during his

trip that there was no doubt that the LRA needed to be dealt with and urged that the protection of civilian populations be a central part of planned operations.

124. (C) The Ugandans requested MONUC's assistance with logistics in early February, but MONUC said its mandate would have to be expanded to allow it to transport Ugandan troops. It can only provide logistics support for FARDC, according to Slobodan Kotevski Didi, the head of MONUC's Kampala office. At a minimum, the Ugandans need MONUC to ferry FARDC troops to provide protection for civilian populations in its area of

operations (i.e. south of Faradje) and to take the burden off its limited helicopter assets. MONUC is working on the roads around Duru to facilitate humanitarian and military operations and is providing transport and sustenance for FARDC troops. On March 11, UN Special Representative Alan Doss announced that MONUC is "progressively reinforcing our modest capacity in Haut Uele to support the FARDC. We are also reinforcing our coordination with the FARDC and the UPDF." However, we have seen no active effort by any member of the UN Security Council, including Uganda, for MONUC's mandate to be expanded to provide direct assistance to the Ugandans.

¶25. (S NF) We do not expect the Ugandan military to share sensitive operational information with MONUC in order to prevent leaks of information to the LRA. As a result, few MONUC personnel are privy to tactical information, which limits MONUC's effectiveness.

WHERE IS IT GOING? RECOMMENDATIONS

¶26. (C) We recommend continued support for OLT (Ref G). The regional cooperation that has been established to fight the LRA and other negative forces is unprecedented. And, if sustained and expanded, could significantly advance regional stability. The joint action has picked up momentum and the LRA is suffering losses of personnel and equipment in every engagement. OLT has destroyed all LRA bases, which are now occupied by Ugandan forces. The LRA's command and control and food and ammunition supplies are low. Top LRA leaders have been forced out of their camps and into hiding. The LRA's communications ability has been severely degraded, which has also cut them off from their external collaborators.

--We consistently hear from ex-LRA combatants that the best way to protect civilians from the LRA is to maintain military pressure on the LRA. They say that Kony's current strategy is to wait out the operation (as he has successfully done during the past 23 years) and that Kony plans his actions around the possibility that the UPDF--the only force he fears--will be forced to leave. If the UPDF leaves, the remaining LRA elements will undertake retributive attacks on local populations and begin to rebuild themselves, as they have done in the past through raids on towns, and villages, and kidnappings of porters, child soldiers, and sex slaves.

--We expect the operation to continue degrading LRA capabilities, to regularly engage LRA elements. This is a slow process, which could be stepped up with an increase in UPDF mobility (i.e. more helicopter support) and logistics support.

¶27. (S NF) We are concerned, however, that Kabila's weak position domestically could cause him to end his support for the operation prematurely. This would have serious consequences for Congolese civilians. For this reason, we believe it is imperative that we shore up Kabila's confidence to allow the operation to achieve its objectives. We also should be concerned that international opinion could shift from its current tepid support for OLT toward calls for its pre-mature termination. That would be the worst of all possible outcomes as it would preclude the elimination once and for all of the LRA threat to the region.

¶28. (U) Kinshasa has cleared this cable.
BROWNING